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ON CORRECTING MISTAKEN IDEAS ON THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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## ON CORRECTING MISTAKEN IDEAS ON THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

[Editor's note The following is reputed to be authored by Mao Zedong If so this would be the only known work of Mao's to examine the revolutionary nature of the American war of independence Endnotes have been added for clarification ]

It has been said that General George Washington, Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, did not fight a true guerrilla war to liberate the people of the Americas from enemy colonialism It is true that General Washington did not see the political uses to which the Continental Army could be put since he was unschooled in the theory of revolutionary war It is also true that the revolutionary war was not supported by peasants struggling to achieve an agrarian revolution And yet, General Washington fought and won a protracted people's war How can this be so?

Often, wars of strong imperialist powers against weak and agrarian colonies lead to national subjugation A thorough study of the interconnections of all factors on the enemy's side and on the American side leads us to conclude that the American revolutionary war was a protracted war because the enemy side had shortcomings and the American side had advantages General Washington reduced the enemy's advantages and aggravated his shortcomings On the other hand, General Washington also enhanced his advantages and remedied his shortcomings and thus won his final victory and averted subjugation The British enemy, ultimately doomed to defeat, could not avert the collapse of his whole imperialist system

How did General Washington do this? Through properly assessing the characteristics of the American revolutionary war, it was clear that the only path to victory against the British enemy lay in the application of three principles of revolutionary war attacking weakness, avoiding strength, and being patient These principles were applied in the three stages of revolutionary war strategic defensive, strategic stalemate and strategic offensive

## Characteristics of War

Strategy and tactics must be derived from the characteristics influencing the conduct of war. Only by a thorough assessment of these characteristics is it possible to identify the enemy's strengths and weaknesses and thus avoid the first and attack the second. The first characteristic of America's revolutionary war is that the Americas were a vast, loosely aligned group of colonies of imperial England, unevenly developed economically. This state of affairs indicates that it was possible for the revolutionary war to develop and attain victory. Let us analyze this characteristic.

The American colonies stretched some 1500 miles along the eastern seaboard and westward to the Appalachian mountains, a result of the British proclamation following Pontiac's War.<sup>1</sup> Although this territory was but a small portion of the colonies' eventual expansion across the continent, the colonists at that time numbered fewer than three million. Farms were scattered, towns and villages were few, and the terrain was rough and mountainous in some areas, and swampy in others.

The American colonies at first prospered under the yoke of British colonialism, but oppressive, imperialistic laws began to take their toll.<sup>2</sup> Citizens began to understand the long arm of British rule with the imposition of martial law in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The loose association of colonies was a potential weakness.<sup>3</sup>

Like China, the level of economic development was uneven across the colonies. Some colonies prospered from the rum trade, others from tobacco and others subsisted on farming. Thus, to sever one part of the colonies from another would have little impact, although this goal formed the British plan from 1777.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the loss of major battles in the northern colonies had little impact on the tactical successes achieved in the southern colonies using evasive and

fluid movements<sup>5</sup> The uneven development between northern and southern colonies, which were mostly agrarian, was used to the revolution's advantage. lengthening the supply lines of the enemy This first characteristic determines not only political strategy and tactics, but also military strategy and tactics<sup>6</sup>

The second characteristic was the great strength of the enemy forces of Great Britain It is estimated that Britain had close to 40,000 infantry at the start of the revolution But, more importantly, the British had absolute naval superiority over the Americas, given their long and indefensible coastline<sup>7</sup> The enemy forces were highly skilled and highly trained, but they were also supplemented by mercenaries Their greatest strength lie in their ability to field formations No other enemy forces existed In this way, the American revolutionary forces did not have to contend with other. invading forces, unlike the Red Army's need to repel invading Japanese forces before it could establish a true people's state Thus, the task of the Continental Army was simpler than that of the Red Army This is the second characteristic influencing the conduct of a people's war

The third characteristic was the small size and weakness of the Continental Army<sup>8</sup> General Washington understood the need to recruit soldiers to the cause, but conflicting circumstances dictated the small size of the army Because General Washington neglected the political uses to which a revolutionary army must be put, his only leverage in attracting soldiers was through money and food, neither of which was plentiful during the armed struggle<sup>9</sup> A truer instrument of a people's war was the colonial militia, comprised of citizen-soldiers Yet, many citizen-soldiers in these militia were landowners and thus felt greater allegiance to their crops than to the struggle for political autonomy General Washington correctly assessed that citizen-

soldiers could usefully supplement the regular army, but the next stage in the development of the revolution required a disciplined army to fight the enemy

Stories of the weakness of the Continental Army are legion. On one occasion, American forces gave up without firing a shot at enemy forces that they outnumbered 3 to 1<sup>10</sup> Most officers had fought only in the French and Indian War, including General Washington. This inexperience of soldiers and officers, especially in line warfare, was complicated by short-term enlistments and a general lack of discipline<sup>11</sup>

The fourth characteristic in the case of China was the primacy of the Communist Party supported by the strength of the agrarian revolution. This great strength was lacking in the Americas. The population included peasants, and many of the regular army owned little land if at all, but land ownership was more widespread in the colonies than in China<sup>12</sup> Was America suited for a protracted people's war? Without the great strength of people yearning for economic autonomy, would it not be impossible to sustain a protracted war?<sup>13</sup>

#### The political and military objectives of war

The political objective of the war was to oust British imperialism and build up a new America of freedom and equality. The British did not hold strong geographical positions at the outset of the war. Since British expulsion was the goal of the war, General Washington hoped for a political rather than military decision. Washington, like other revolutionary comrades, understood the necessity to exhaust the enemy politically if not militarily.

The military objective of war was nothing but to preserve oneself and annihilate the enemy<sup>14</sup> General Washington's first priority was to preserve the army, without which there could be no revolutionary war. Both Washington and guerrilla leader Nathanael Greene realized

the population would not rally around militias and that the revolution depended on a disciplined army <sup>15</sup> But more importantly, Washington and Greene knew that the war was not about preservation of territory, but exhaustion of the enemy

A victorious struggle rests on the ability of the revolutionary leader to fuse knowledge, intellect, passion and discipline in the conduct of war. The successful leader must study, listen, learn, think, evaluate and reevaluate the continually changing conditions of conflict. Early on, many colonists hoped that the outbreak of war would shock the British enemy into conciliation. After the Battle of Bunker Hill, General Washington believed that a few decisive blows to British forces would convince the enemy of the undesirability of subjugating the colonies militarily. Following the unsuccessful expeditions of Montgomery and Arnold into Canada, General Washington concluded that “preventing incursions of the enemy into our colonies” by fortifications was a critical task <sup>16</sup> After the unsuccessful defense of New York in 1776, Washington reevaluated the wisdom of the tactical defensive and thereafter avoided confrontations with large concentrations of enemy forces, except to defend Philadelphia, unsuccessfully, in 1777. Indeed, General Washington’s strategy evolved from 1776 into a defense of the existence of his army rather than any geographical points. General Washington’s two tactical successes, at Trenton and Princeton, were conducted against smaller concentrations of enemy forces. These also demonstrate Washington’s understanding of a basic precept of revolutionary survival: the necessity of not remaining idle or following a strategy of passive defense. Here he adhered to the first objective of war: to preserve oneself.

The second objective of war, to annihilate the enemy, was accomplished by classic guerrilla tactics <sup>17</sup> Although critics have noted that General Washington did not seek to revolutionize warfare and indeed adhered to theories of concentrating forces, his subordinate

commanders both in the north and south dispersed their forces in true Red Guard fashion to attack weakness, avoid strength and be patient. It has been said that General Washington refused to wage a guerrilla war because he feared the ultimate effect upon civil society during and following the war and because he believed such a war would lower the dignity of the American cause.<sup>18</sup> This theory is not borne out in practice.<sup>19</sup> General Washington did reject the advice of General Charles Lee to convert the political revolution into a military revolution, but Washington was more likely looking ahead to the next stage of the revolution, which would require an army. Much like the role of the Red Army and the Red Guard, Washington allowed forces like General Nathanael Greene's to conduct hit and run attacks. As the Red Army must be concentrated but the Red Guard could disperse, so too must the Continental Army be concentrated, but other, smaller forces be allowed to disperse to wreak the utmost havoc on enemy forces. Many successful campaigns, like the defeat of Burgoyne at Saratoga and the victory at Cowpens, depended on the conjunction of efforts by both the regular army and irregular forces.

### Three Stages of War

It is natural in the given situation of a strong enemy and weak, agrarian colonies, that the British would adopt a strategic offensive while the Americans adopted the strategic defensive.<sup>20</sup> This is the first stage of the protracted war. With the first enemy raid on the military stores at Concord and Lexington, the British planned to crush the revolt with quick, decisive, and offensive actions. The next two battles of the war -- the Battle of Bunker Hill and the capture of Ticonderoga -- gave hope to General Washington that some battles could be fought and won, but these were aberrations of American victory in defensive and offensive tactics. The campaign to Canada led by Montgomery and Arnold failed dismally and Washington's attention turned to



fortifications. With the loss of New York City in 1776, General Washington concluded that the enemy was too strong to face fully even from the tactical defensive position.<sup>21</sup> Understanding that the army was the key to the revolution, Washington engineered small victories at Trenton and Princeton, conducted against segments of the British forces, to maintain the fight. These and other tactical successes did not constitute a turn to the strategic offensive until the culminating months of the war, when superior French naval and land forces were brought to bear against Cornwallis' forces in Yorktown. From 1778, Washington hoped to launch an offensive ambitious enough to compel the British to abandon the war.<sup>22</sup> In the north, a strategic stalemate began in 1778 following the famous winter quartering of Washington's forces at Valley Forge. Under the tutelage of Baron von Steuben, American revolutionary forces began to prepare for the counter-offensive. This second stage of protracted war was aided by the withdrawal of the British from Philadelphia to New York in mid-1778 and the entry of France into the war on the American side in May 1778. Although the British began a new offensive in the south in 1780, this was a false offensive, ultimately forcing the British strategic retreat. This strategic retreat was conducted in the House of Commons, following the defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781.<sup>23</sup>

#### Reducing the Enemy's Advantages. Aggravating his Shortcomings

Let us now analyze how General Washington reduced the enemy's advantages and aggravated his shortcomings in the protracted American war.<sup>24</sup> The enemy's advantages were many. His forces were large and well disciplined. General Washington corrected the problem of adventurism following the failed campaigns to Canada, opting for small offensives at Trenton and Princeton. On the defensive, General Washington abandoned positional warfare and fixed

operational fronts after the loss of New York City and attempted to utilize the correct principle of fluid fronts and mobile warfare. By stretching the enemy forces thin between the north and south, keeping General Clinton in New York while sending French forces to Yorktown, General Washington attained the victory culminating in British defeat. General Washington was strictly against guerrillaism in the Continental Army, but applauded the guerrilla-like tactics of generals such as Nathanael Greene and Francis Marion. Thus, he aggravated the enemy's shortcomings in knowledge of the territory and intelligence. He understood that while the war unavoidably would be protracted, he could not afford protracted campaigns, which would play to the strength of the enemy. He often fought with one fist, taking care not to risk his whole army. There is much evidence that he was a strict disciplinarian and disapproved of banditry and roving insurgents. And finally, he strove constantly to bring the Continental Army to a new stage, persisting after the end of the war to establish a regular, professional army. He was cognizant of the need to gain all possible allies, especially the French, in an effort to reduce the advantages of the large British forces, especially the navy.

#### Enhancing the Revolution's Advantages. Reducing its Shortcomings

The correct application of these principles also worked to enhance the revolution's advantages and reduce its shortcomings. The tactics of Nathanael Greene's 1781 flight to the Dan River, leading Cornwallis astray, exhibited the lack of conservatism on the defensive. The natural advantages of using citizen-soldiers who had fought Indians were enhanced by support for the guerrilla character of the militia and some commanders under the Continental Army. Thus, Dan Morgan was sent to Saratoga to conduct guerrilla tactics in the rear of Burgoyne's forces. The use of fluid operational fronts and mobile warfare and the abandonment of

defending geographical territory enhanced the survival of the Continental Army and thus the life of the revolution. British forces were thus subject to attrition while gaining territory, which was ultimately useless in achieving their objective – the end of the revolution. General Washington sought to reduce his shortcomings in the strength and size of his army through discipline and a democratic way of life within military discipline. In contrast, General Clinton's admonishment to Charleston's loyalists to join the British army or face arrest in 1780 met with passive resistance in the form of the citizens' provision of guides, intelligence and supplies to the revolution.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, General Washington did not correctly apply the principle that the Continental Army is the propagandist and organizer of the revolution, despite the fact that the officers saw themselves as the defenders of the republic against popular abandonment of the cause.<sup>26</sup> This shows a correct reading of the fourth characteristic of the American revolution, but also the limits of the revolution and of General Washington's outlook. There was a great probability of the war ending in failure because of the colonists' attitude at the outset of the war that the ideal military force would be composed of citizen-soldiers temporarily under arms. Without the strength derived from an agrarian revolution, General Washington could not overcome Americans' distrust of standing armies, which resulted in short-term enlistments, a strong preference to serve in militias rather than the army, and the offer of bounties for enlisting that led bourgeois landowners to pay peasants as substitutes in military service. These three factors led to a consistently weak army. Such an army was unable to draw strength from the people and unable to bond together in strife.<sup>27</sup>

General Washington's conduct of a protracted war was based on his assessment of the characteristics from which strategy and tactics are derived. A collection of colonies of unequal

development with a small, weak army that faces a powerful enemy can only conduct a protracted war according to correct principles. It is a wonder that General Washington achieved victory without the strength of an agrarian revolution, but through studying, listening, learning, thinking, evaluating and reevaluating the continually changing conditions of conflict, he was able to see the fundamental laws of the American revolution that led to the ultimate defeat of the enemy.

<sup>1</sup> The October 7, 1763 proclamation ceded almost all of the western territory won from the French in the French and Indian War, which ended in February 1763. See discussion in Don Cook, The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies 1760-1785, (NY: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995) pp. 35-37.

<sup>2</sup> This is likely a reference to the Stamp Act, the Tea Act, the Coercive Acts and the Massachusetts Act dissolving that colony's legislature in 1774.

<sup>3</sup> The first Continental Congress convened in September 1774 to respond to the Coercive Acts.

<sup>4</sup> This could refer to General Burgoyne's strategy of using the Champlain route to Canada, similar to that pursued in the French and Indian War, to divide New York in half, thus separating the northeastern colonies from the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies. The British believed that the revolutionaries were stronger in the north, while the south had a higher concentration of loyalists. For a general discussion of the British strategy, see Cook, *op cit*.

<sup>5</sup> Here Mao must be referring to the hit and run battles fought by General Nathanael Greene and General Francis Marion throughout the Carolinas.

<sup>6</sup> This discussion mirrors closely Mao's discussion of the characteristics of China's Revolutionary War in "Strategic Problems of China's Revolutionary War," which can be found in his Selected Works Vol. 1, (NY: International Publishers, 1958), pp. 192-198.

<sup>7</sup> At the battle of New York City in 1776, British General Howe brought 31,625 soldiers and a fleet of ten ships, twenty frigates, hundreds of transports and 10,000 seamen. Washington himself knew that without naval superiority, New York City would be indefensible. See Russell F. Weigley, The American Way of War (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 3, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Although the Continental Congress authorized 20,000 men for the army in 1775, more than half of the 19,000 men General Washington commanded at New York in 1776 were short-term militiamen. In the fall of 1776, Congress authorized an army of 67,000; Washington wrote the Congress that he had but 3,000 men, two-thirds of which were militia. See Charles Royster, A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character 1775-1783, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), for a comprehensive discussion of the problems Washington faced in staffing the army.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Washington conducted no campaigns in the fall of 1780 for lack of food for the troops. See Royster, *op cit*, pg. 283.

<sup>10</sup> This is the rout of General Gates' army at Camden, South Carolina on August 16, 1779.

<sup>11</sup> One-year enlistments were common in 1775 and 1776. Thereafter, the Continental Congress and the states attempted to introduce 3-year enlistments and enlistments for the duration of the war.

<sup>12</sup> However, the Continental Congress did offer \$20 and the promise of 100 acres of land to recruits as incentive for enlistments for the duration of the war.

<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of the war, the American Whigs, or Patriot Party, constituted a minority that opposed the taxation policy, while the Tories or Loyalists were a majority. Even the Whigs were slow to accept a complete separation from Britain and a good number of the population were apathetic. See Willard M. Wallace, Appeal to Arms: A Military History of the American Revolution, (NY: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1951), pg. 1. One of Washington's greatest risks was losing the passive support of the population in a protracted war.

<sup>14</sup> See Mao Tse Tung, On the Protracted War, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1954), pg. 78.

<sup>15</sup> See Royster, *op cit*, pg. 323.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Weigley, The American Way of War, pg. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Here we must assume that annihilation is used in the same sense it is used in On the Protracted War – that is, "to annihilate the enemy means to disarm him or to deprive him of his power of resistance, and not to annihilate him completely in a physical sense." See Mao Tse Tung, On the Protracted War, pg. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Russell F. Weigley makes this argument in his George Rogers Clark Lecture (Washington DC: University Press of America, Inc., 1990), pp. 3-16.

<sup>19</sup> The dignity of the American fighting forces could not have been much lower than it was at the outset of the war, at least from the British perspective. Perhaps Washington was looking ahead to attracting foreign assistance, although he realized early in the war that this could not be counted upon. Russell Weigley makes the case in his Clark lecture that the guerrilla warfare conducted by Greene and others in the South did not have the effect of any long-lasting instability. See endnote 18 above, pg. 14. General Washington was keenly aware of the need to professionalize the army during and after the war, petitioning Congress for pensions.

<sup>20</sup> See Mao Tse Tung, On the Protracted War, pg. 82.

<sup>21</sup> These two points are made on pages 8 and 11 of Weigley, The American Way of War.

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<sup>22</sup> This argument is made on pg 38 of Weigley, The American Way of War. The extent to which Washington considered this a strategic offensive is probably indicated in his poor choice of New York City as the site. Fortunately, he was persuaded by the French to attack at Yorktown instead.

<sup>23</sup> This argument reveals Mao's understanding of war as fundamentally political. The defeat of Cornwallis, commanding a relatively small portion of the British forces, strengthened the hand of anti-war faction in the House of Commons, triggering Lord Germain's (head of the American Department) ouster in early 1782. Although Prime Minister North averted the king's abdication, his government fell in March. Lord Rockingham quickly ordered the withdrawal of British forces (which took 18 months to complete), and the commencement of peace negotiations. For an excellent discussion, see Cook, op cit pp 348 ff.

<sup>24</sup> This analysis follows the lines of Mao's discussion of strategy and tactics ensuing from the characteristics of the conduct of war. See 'Strategic Problems of China's Revolutionary War,' Chapter III, Selected Works op cit . pp 192-198.

<sup>25</sup> See Royster, op cit , pg 321.

<sup>26</sup> Royster op cit , pg 315 ff.

<sup>27</sup> Here Mao could be referring to the failure of the Newburgh conspiracy. General Washington was able to divert the promise of a military overthrow only by virtue of the greater division between officers and soldiers than the division between soldiers and the people. Washington knew the soldiers would sooner go home than follow the officers west, and in fact the army disbanded within a month of the British forces' departure. For a comprehensive discussion, see Royster, op cit , pp 333-341. Bounties for enlistment were first offered in 1777 by the Continental Congress. These were \$20 for a 3-yr enlistment and the additional offer of 100 acres of land for a duration enlistment. By the end of 1779, the 3-yr enlisted soldiers were all about to go home, and the army offered \$100 for reenlistment for the duration. The terms of the settlement were confused however and soldiers believed they would be imprisoned if they did not accept, setting the stage for the mutiny of 1780/81. The issue of substitute service arises in the South during the Civil War, where it eventually was banned.